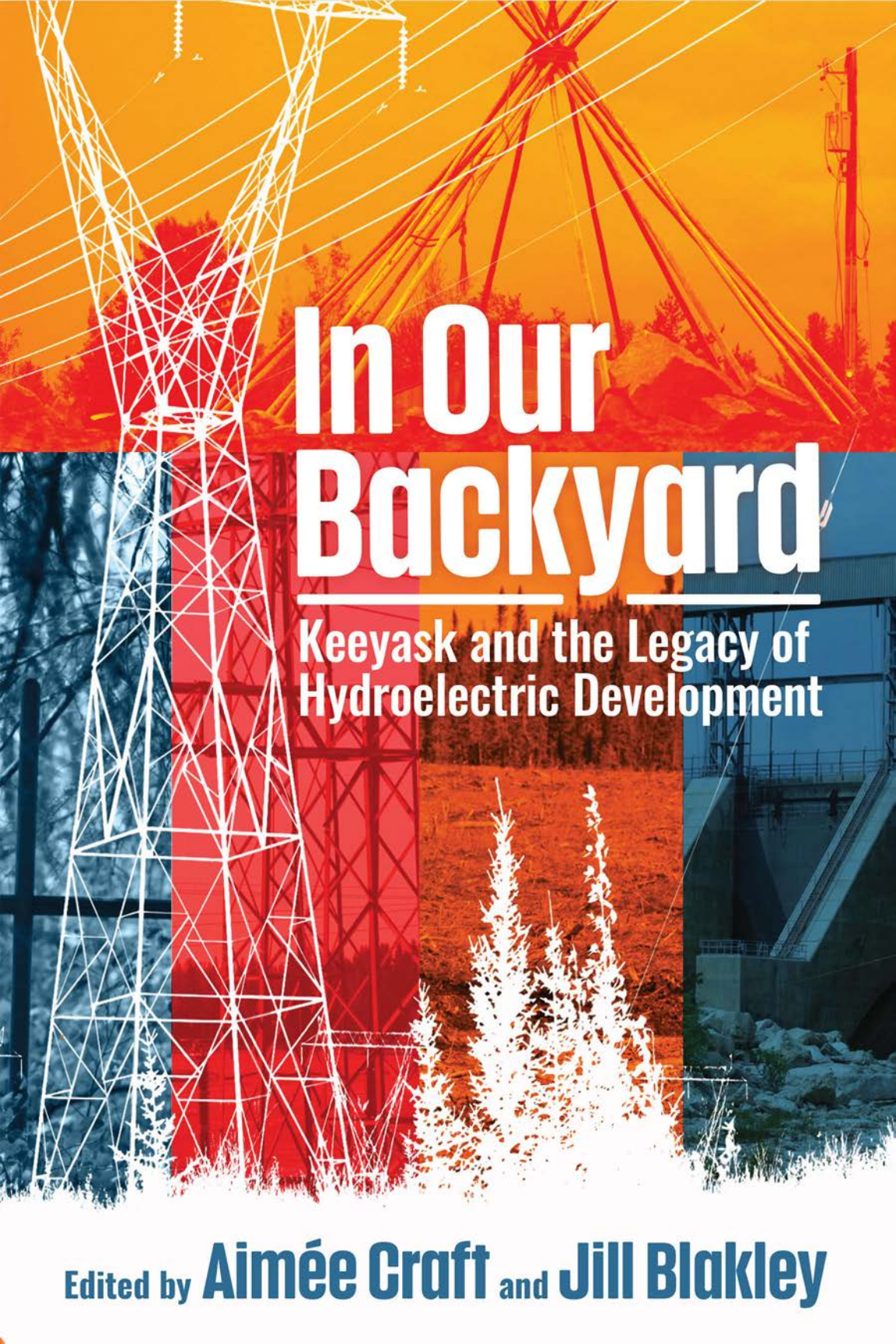




In Our Backyard

Keeyask and the Legacy of
Hydroelectric Development

Edited by **Aimée Craft** and **Jill Blakley**

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AIMÉE CRAFT AND JILL BLAKLEY



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| **Canada**

Names

Ovide Mercredi

I live near a river
It flows by my home
As a child we played together
I, running along its shore
It, rushing by me swiftly
We knew each other by name.

It shared its water with me
For drinking, bathing and swimming
It carried me from place to place
The river still flows by my home
It still knows my name
Even tho it's not the same
A hydro dam came to stop us
I, from living my people's way
It, from flowing freely as before.

I lived near the Misipawistik
A Grand Rapids along the Saskatchewan
Too powerful and great for its own good
Was taken advantage of for progress
Like my people and their culture too.

Now, the Misipawistik is strangely silent
The crackle of electricity replaced its voice
Just as the cackle of Hydro money and bosses
Have drowned our traditional ways and lands.

The river and my people are not the same
Many changes have come in infamy
I cannot drink from the river no more
You cannot hunt on land under water
We both miss the roaring Misipawistik
But, we still know each other's names.

27 December 2006

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FOREWORD

TERRY SARGEANT, FORMER CHAIR OF THE MANITOBA
CLEAN ENVIRONMENT COMMISSION

As I begin to write these comments, Canada and the entire world are consumed by the intense struggle to contain the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February 2020, Canada's attention was focused on the blockades of rail lines by those supporting the Wet'suwet'en hereditary chiefs in their opposition to the Coastal GasLink pipeline in northern British Columbia, as well as focused on the Government of Canada's then-pending decision on whether or not to approve Teck Resources' application to build a very large oil sands project in northern Alberta.

At that time, Warren Mabee, in an opinion piece posted on the-conversation.com, wrote: "New energy projects have never faced such an uncertain pathway to success." In particular, his piece addressed the changing role of Indigenous peoples in making decisions about resource development in their territories.¹

This book does the same, in a much more comprehensive way. It looks, in particular, at the experience many of its authors had in respect to the Keeyask Generating Project. It sets the context for this most recent development by reviewing the sixty-plus-year history of hydro-electric resource development in northern Manitoba.

Manitoba Hydro's developments in northern Manitoba began with the Kelsey Generating Station on the Nelson River in the mid-1950s, built to support the nickel mine in Thompson, followed by the Grand Rapids Generating Station on the Saskatchewan River in the 1960s. After that came the start of major development of the lower Nelson, which led to massive rearrangements of waterways throughout the province. These included: the Churchill, Burntwood, and upper Nelson rivers; South Indian Lake; Playgreen Lake; and Lake Winnipeg, among many others.

To say that the impacts of these developments on the human and natural ecology of the region were devastating would be an understatement.

These impacts have been very well documented. Compensation agreements have been negotiated and signed and implemented. Promises to do things differently in the future have been made.

Much damage has been done over those six decades. Tens of thousands of Indigenous people were left to build lives in this much-changed environment. That continues; the damage cannot be undone.

With the backdrop of their Keeyask experiences, the editors and authors of this book have set out to examine the legacy of this development; to examine how and why certain decisions were made by successive governments of Manitoba, Manitoba Hydro, and their agents; to look at the impacts on individuals and communities; and to set out some thoughts on how it might have been done differently. It is their hope that this will lead to better understanding of these impacts, as well as better processes for any future development in northern Manitoba, processes that, at the very least, involve the local Indigenous communities from the very start.

As a Manitoban, I must accept my share in the guilt for this legacy. As an individual, my role has been involved and wide-ranging.

I was an undergrad in university when then-premier Duff Roblin, in a major announcement, introduced the plans for huge hydroelectric development in northern Manitoba. It was to include a number of large generating stations on just about the whole length of the Nelson River, smaller stations on other rivers, including the Burntwood, and significant diversions of other waterways, including the Churchill River.

While policy makers have known about the potential for such development since the early years of the last century, serious planning began in the late 1950s, early 1960s. The plan, as envisaged in the mid-1960s, would have seen as many as eight large generating stations built one after the other, from the upper Nelson, near Cross Lake, to the mouth of Hudson Bay.

One element of this plan involved high-level flooding of South Indian Lake. This would have resulted in the need to move virtually all of the people who lived and worked around this lake. This became a significant issue in the provincial election campaign in June 1969, and contributed to the defeat of the incumbent government.

Also, in June 1969, I took a job at Kettle Rapids and spent six years living and working in Gillam. As such, I was witness to some of the impact of this development on the local Indigenous peoples.

As the Member of Parliament for Selkirk-Interlake in the early 1980s, I represented a number of First Nations communities, two of which—Grand Rapids (now Misipawistik Cree Nation) and Chemawawin Cree Nation at Easterville—experienced significant, negative impacts from the construction of the Grand Rapids Generating Station in the mid-1960s. In visiting those communities, I was told much as to how their lives had been changed by this construction. In the case of Chemawawin, the entire community had been moved from an area rich in fishing and trapping to an area built on rock. This new locale, among other things, made it impossible to install underground water and sewer systems. (However, the houses for the non-Indigenous teachers were serviced by above-ground utilidors, which carried water and sewer.)

This was my first real lesson on the impacts of development in Indigenous territories, with no involvement of the local peoples. I have not forgotten it.

In the later 1980s, I worked for Manitoba Northern Affairs as plans were underway for the construction of the Limestone Generating Station. The Manitoba government and Manitoba Hydro introduced initiatives to enable Indigenous people to work on this project. A major complaint on the projects at Grand Rapids, Kettle, and Long Spruce was that the locals were most often the last hired, first laid-off. And, for the most part, they were relegated to menial, low-skilled jobs.

As an example, in the winter of 1970, of more than 200 employees of the principal contractor at Kettle, there was only one local Indigenous person, a labourer. (As an aside: he continued to work for the contractor, becoming a highly skilled bulldozer operator. With the premier of Manitoba sitting beside him, Noah Massan “turned the sod” for the opening of the Limestone Project in the mid-1980s. Thirty years later, he argued passionately against hydroelectric development at the Keeyask regulatory hearings.)

Perhaps the most important initiative, in the run-up to the Limestone Project, was one to train and support Indigenous workers, so that they wouldn’t be restricted to mostly unskilled work. Training programs included everything from bus driving to carpentry to mechanics

and, even, professional engineering. As well, there was an on-site support program throughout the project.

With the completion of the Limestone Generating Station in the early 1990s and the abandonment of the Conawapa Project at the same time, there was no new hydro development for over a decade.

The new millennium brought a revitalization of hydro development, with, first, the Wuskwatim Generating Station, near Nelson House; followed by Bipole III, with attendant converter stations at Keewatinook, on the Nelson River, near where Conawapa may or may not be built, and another at Riel, just outside Winnipeg; and the Keeyask Generating Station on the Nelson, near Split Lake.

In this post-2000 era of hydro development, there are two new and very different elements to the process: environmental review, and the involvement of First Nations as equity partners in the projects.

In 1988, Manitoba adopted a new Environment Act. Among its provisions was a redesigned role for the Clean Environment Commission (CEC). While the CEC had been around in different formats and with different names since the 1930s, after 1988, it was charged with conducting reviews of potential impacts to the environment by proposed developments.

In January 2004, I was appointed to be the chair of the CEC and continued in that role until September 2016. Upon appointment, I immediately joined the panel reviewing the proposed Wuskwatim Generating Station. This was the first such review of a hydro project. Since then, Manitoba Hydro has appeared before the commission on a number of occasions, including for Bipole III and Keeyask, and to renew their licence to use Lake Winnipeg as a storage basin.

At the time I left, the commission was engaged in a wide-ranging review of the cumulative effects of all of the hydro development involving the Nelson, Churchill, and related rivers. It was the commission's view that such an assessment could provide a very valuable base for planning any future development in northern Manitoba. While a change in government in 2016 narrowed the scope of this review, the commission, in May 2018, filed a valuable report: *A Review of the Regional Cumulative Effects Assessment for Hydroelectric Developments on the Nelson, Burntwood, and Churchill River Systems*.²

Given my role as chair, my views on the CEC review process will be a bit biased. All in all, I think it is a valuable process. During my time with

the commission, we expanded the nature of our reviews and, particularly, the role of the public in this work. We travelled throughout the regions germane to the specific review, visiting many towns and First Nations. In those communities, we heard heart-rending stories about past impacts, as well as very reasoned thoughts in respect of the projects under review and their potential impacts.

An important part of the CEC process is a program that makes funding available to groups wishing to be involved in the review processes. This allows community groups, First Nations, consumer groups, and others to engage fully in the process. The funding allows them to hire professionals, to hold community sessions, and to attend the review hearings to present their case and to question the proponents.

It is my firm belief that this “intervener-funding” and stakeholder involvement are essential parts of the review process, leading to a more comprehensive review and, ultimately, to a better result.

It is worth noting that most of the contributors to this book have participated in one or more of the CEC reviews of Manitoba Hydro projects of the past two decades.

Still, the CEC review process is not perfect. It could be improved by granting it more independence and more resources.

Under the Environment Act, the CEC is only an advisory body. The commission gives advice to the minister, who then makes the decision as to whether the project should go ahead. It is also the minister’s decision as to whether or not the CEC gets to review any given proposal. And, the minister gets to define the scope of the review.

While I can understand the reason for giving the minister the final say on the go-ahead, I believe that it should not be the minister’s decision as to whether or not a specific project is subject to review. Neither should they be the one to set the terms of the review.

In my view, regulations should set out a clearly defined list of project types that would be automatically subject to a review by the commission. It would be up to the commission, with public input, to establish the scope of the review. This would, of course, require some additional resources for the commission. But the result would be very much worth it.

The second “new” element is the involvement of First Nations as equity partners. The Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation in Nelson House is a 30 percent partner in the Wuskwatim Generating Station. Four First

Nations—Tataskweyak Cree Nation, Fox Lake Cree Nation, York Factory First Nation, and War Lake First Nation—have the option to share up to a 25 percent piece of the Keeyask Generating Station.

The concept of equity partnership for First Nations came up for discussion in the later 1980s, as the Limestone Project unfolded. With the pause in hydro development in the 1990s, the idea went nowhere until plans for Wuskwatim became serious and Nisichawayasihk became a partner with Manitoba Hydro. With Hydro's decision to proceed with Keeyask, rather than the much-larger Conawapa Project, it was the First Nations, led by Tataskweyak, that approached Hydro about becoming partners.

While this idea is certainly laudable, the jury is still out as to just how valuable it will turn out to be for the First Nations partners. Some of the arrangements have had to be considerably reworked. Benefits to the communities have not accrued nearly as quickly as anticipated.

There is important discussion on these partnership arrangements in this book.

While this book does focus on experiences surrounding the development of the Keeyask Generating Station, it also reviews many aspects of the history of hydroelectric development in northern Manitoba over the past six-plus decades.

This history is widely known: of widespread, negative impacts to individuals, to communities, to ways of life, to wildlife, and to the environment. These impacts are given further discussion in this book.

There has been much written about this history over many years—books, reports of many inquiries, reviews and studies, academic papers, and so on. There is still a need for a book such as this one. While it incorporates much of the long history, by using Keeyask as its focus, it includes the more recent experiences of the last couple of decades.

This is important, not only because of the development of new projects in the past two decades but also because of a much-changed political context in which to examine these issues. This context includes the much greater attention paid to environmental matters; in particular, climate change, as well as the relatively new era of “reconciliation” in Canada.

I will not go deeply into a discussion of reconciliation, as I am far from being an expert on it. For most Canadians, it is still a new concept.

For the Canada of the future, reconciliation is very important, a concept that will require much work on all sides to define, as well as much action to implement. Within this concept of reconciliation is a recognition that we need to re-examine the rights of Indigenous peoples to determine not only how they live and work in their traditional territories but also how they are fully involved as future resource developments unfold.

This book may be viewed as one of many small steps on the road to reconciliation. While they may not specifically state it, the authors of this book have written their chapters within this political context, with an awareness of the reconciliation process. This will add to its value as a significant contribution to much-needed and ongoing discussions.

At the outset, I quoted a writer who questioned the uncertain future for major energy projects. So, in conclusion, we need to ask whether there will be future hydroelectric development in Manitoba. We know that there is the capacity for much more such development.

Over the last decade or so, a number of observers have written of the end of “big dams.” But, as the world moves away from fossil fuels over the next few decades, there is already talk of the need for more hydroelectric power (as well as nuclear) to replace fossil fuel-generated energy.

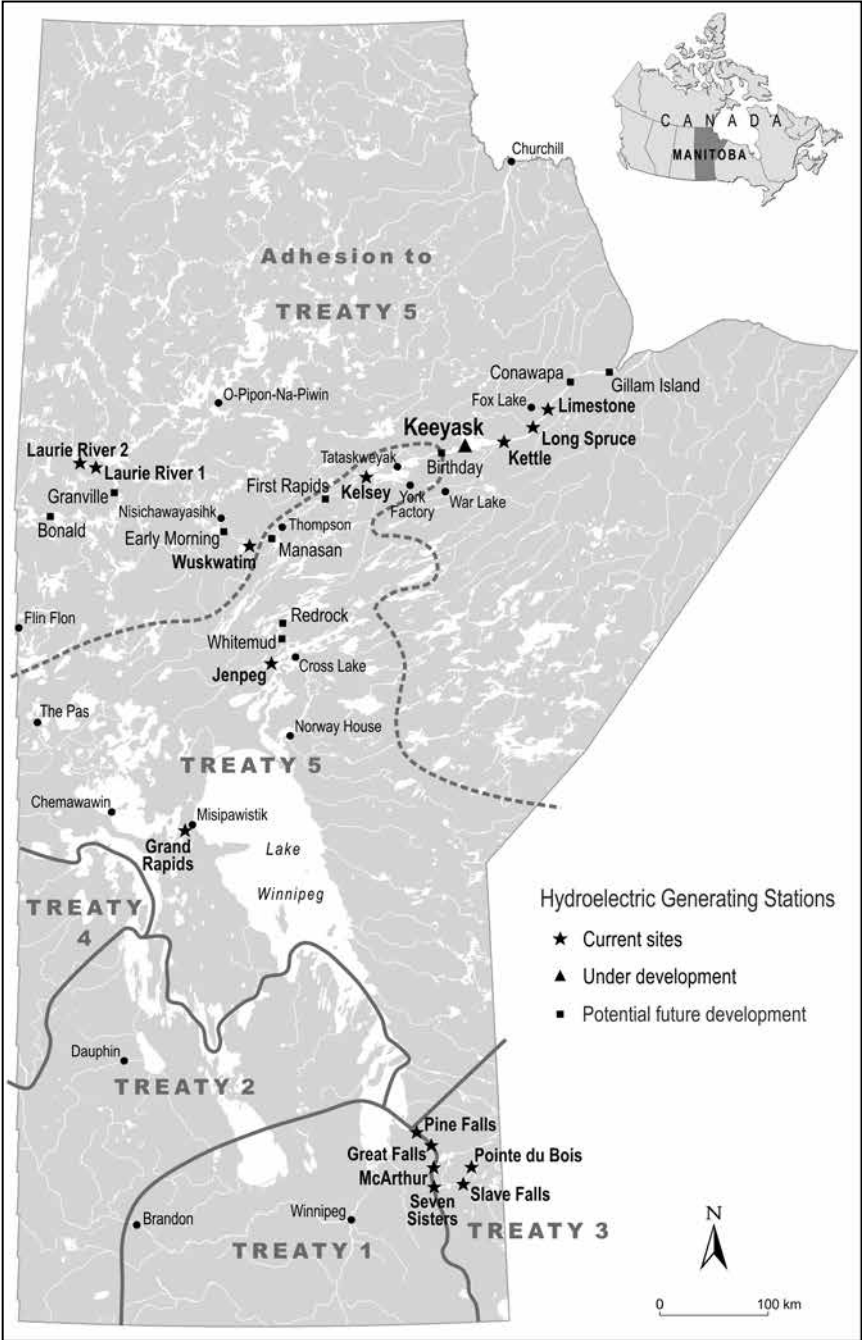
While we know that the development of hydroelectric power is not nearly as “clean” as many believe, it may prove to be a very difficult fight to convince an energy-abusing world otherwise.

If it does come to that, there will need to be much more consideration given to environmental concerns and much more involvement of the peoples who have lived in their territories for many millennia.

This book, I believe, can play an important role in those discussions.

Notes

- 1 Warren Mabee, “Teck Aftermath: Ottawa Must Reconcile Big Energy Projects with Climate Policy,” <https://theconversation.com/teck-aftermath-ottawa-must-reconcile-big-energy-projects-with-climate-policy-132484>.
- 2 Available online at the Manitoba Clean Environment Commission, <http://www.cecmanitoba.ca>.



In Our Backyard

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